

Self - awareness and HIV nursing

Introduction

Patients with HIV often present to services with complex and challenging psychosocial issues. As nurses, we are often required to discuss the sexual disclosure of HIV, testing of children/sexual partners, issues around sexuality, risky sexual behavior, harm reduction and the onward transmission of HIV. When working with others in a professional capacity, it is important that we are clear about our own personal beliefs, values and needs. We need to be aware of how these differ to those of others to prevent emotional exhaustion and burnout and to enable us to provide non-judgmental care. Self-awareness is a process which enables nurses to learn more about their personal beliefs and values. It enables objective examination of oneself and is considered as an important tool during the development of a therapeutic relationship with patients.

I wonder if I've changed in the night. Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, 'who in the world am I? Ah, that is the puzzle! 1. (Alice in Alice's adventures in Wonderland Carroll 1866:19 1).

Alice's contemplation about her change in the night might prompt thinking about the times when we feel we have changed a little during our working day. This shift might be due to enjoyable or distressing events. Alternatively, these shifts in perspective can occur as a result of learning new knowledge which encourages us to challenge previously held beliefs. So, as Alice points out, if we are not the same person as we were then, who are we?

Background

Rasheed (2015:1 2) states that 'knowing about oneself is not an easy task; it is a painful and time-consuming process. The process starts with conscious awareness and struggling through continuous effort'. Self-awareness development is a complex process as we learn to recognize why certain events have an impact on us and what this means for us as a professional. How does this conscious awareness manifest itself in order to begin our journey of knowing ourselves better? It might begin with an uncomfortable feeling after a challenging day at work. Alternatively, this awareness might begin with our personal thoughts that we do not share because we fear judgement.

The process of self-awareness enables nurses to examine their own value positions so these biases and prejudices are not projected onto others who do not share similar values (3) .It is only when we know ourselves that we can begin to know others. The process of self-awareness is important because our psychological state influences the way patients' information is analysed, which then informs the care they receive.

Self-awareness is a familiar and valuable concept within nursing. It is hoped that the following article will encourage thinking around the issue of self-awareness by;

- Discussing the concept of self –awareness;
- Considering its importance in health care practice particularly during therapeutic communication
- Exploring the ways in which nurses can develop self-awareness to support effective practice.

The concept of self-awareness

One of the characteristics that differentiates human beings from other animals is the ability to think consciously in deliberate, complex and often abstract ways about ourselves (4). As individuals we possess a wealth of self-knowledge that is based on our previous experiences, inner thoughts, feelings, intentions and goals (5). For the majority of the time this information is private and not readily available to others. It could be argued that some people may not even recognize their inner thoughts and feelings unless of course they make a conscious effort to do so.

Thinking point

How often do you consider your own thoughts and feelings? Do you ever feel that your feelings are guiding your actions? This might be in positive or negative ways. Have there been times when you have said or done things that you later wish you had not? What was guiding your actions at this time? When we become more aware of our thoughts and feelings we can monitor them, and use them to guide our actions in positive and affirming ways.

Becoming self-aware is considered a conscious process, in which we consider 'understanding ourselves' (6). Within this process we begin to know our own strengths and limitations, understand our emotions and the impact that our behavior has on the therapeutic relationship with others (7). The process of becoming self-aware is ongoing, a process that is never complete and requires us to constantly reevaluate where we are, what we have learnt and what we still have to learn (8). Self-awareness is one aspect of emotional intelligence (EI) which is considered to be of great importance in the clinical setting. Nurses who possess EI are more aware of their emotions which leads them to be better communicators and carers, as they can provide care without being consumed by their own feelings (9).

When we understand ourselves we can become aware of our strengths and aspects that could be developed. Through self-awareness we start to begin to know ourselves better and identify what we would be willing to accept in others (7). In doing this we can develop our professional identity by reflecting on our values and beliefs (10). We can become more aware of our positive qualities and those we might like to develop, so that we can support others more effectively. By developing our self-awareness we can become more effective in both our personal and professional lives.

Self - awareness and communication

The nurse patient relationship is central to meeting the care needs of patients. Collins (2009 11) suggests that communication is fundamental in the building of a therapeutic relationship. She goes on to suggest that through communication patients can be reassured, be taken seriously, understand their illness more fully, voice their concerns, feel empowered, be motivated to follow a medication regimen, express a desire to take treatment (or not) and be given time and treated with respect within nursing. The first step in being able to facilitate effective relationships is an awareness of how you are communicating with patients and how this communication is being received. The very essence of communication rests with the notion that messages sent are received in a manner that they are intended. Becoming more self-aware can help with this process, as it is when we know and understand ourselves better, we can use this knowledge to inform our actions when dealing with others in a therapeutic way. Travelbee (1971: 19 12) defines the therapeutic use of self as 'when a nurse uses self therapeutically she consciously makes use of her personality and knowledge in order to effect a change in the ill person. This change is considered therapeutic when it alleviates the individual's stresses'. In order for the nurse to use knowledge about herself therapeutically with patients, then the nurse needs to be self- aware and have an understanding of the reasons why she is using certain aspects of herself within the relationship.

Thinking point

Can you think of a time when you used your own personal knowledge and experiences with a patient? What were your concerns? What was the impact on the patient? What would prevent you from using 'therapeutic self' within your clinical practice?

McMahon (1998 13) identifies a number of characteristics, such as confidence, knowledge and support that may affect the nurses' ability to nurse therapeutically, emphasizing the role of self-awareness in this process. Taylor (1998:74 14) suggests, "...Some nurses may choose to hide behind their professional mask and talk in high falsetto pitch to mimic the 'soapie' representations of a 'real' nurse. Acting out the role of a nurse may also serve to protect the hapless practitioner from the everyday battlefield of clinical work, where emotional knocks and bruises may be the norm'. There are a multiple reasons that might make it difficult for the nurse to use 'therapeutic self' within the patient consultation. The process of self-awareness enables the nurse to establish what these factors might be and the impact and influence this might have on patient care.

Developing self-awareness

It has been suggested that some people are naturally self-aware and do not need to engage in development of this aspect of practice. Fletcher and Baldry

(2000 15) state that self-awareness is found in a minority of individuals, who could be described as being 'naturally' self-aware. Many of us would benefit from self-awareness development and there are a number of helpful ways to proceed. Frameworks such as The Johari Window can help us to identify our 'blind' areas, so that we can begin to understand ourselves more effectively.

Johari window

A way to improve our understanding of ourselves is through the use of the Johari window. The Johari window (Table 1) was created by two American psychologists, Joseph Luft and Harington Ingham, as a technique to help people better understand the relationship with themselves as well as others (16).

The Johari window is a four quadrants grid. The first quadrant represents the 'open area' and things that you know about yourself, and the things that others know about you. This includes your behavior, knowledge, skills attitudes and the history about you that others know.

The second quadrant is the 'closed area'. This represents things about you that you aren't aware of, but that are known by others. This can include simple information you do not know, or it can involve deep issues (for example, feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, unworthiness or rejection), which are often difficult for people to face directly, and yet can be seen by others.

The third quadrant is the 'hidden area' and represents things that you know about yourself, but that others do not know.

The final part of the quadrant is the 'unknown area' and represents things that are unknown by you, and are unknown by others.

When undertaking this exercise with colleagues, the goal of the Johari Window is to enlarge the open area, without disclosing information that is too personal. The open area is the most important quadrant as the more you know about yourself the more you will become aware of the influences this has on your thoughts, beliefs and behaviors. As you share information the 'open area' expands and the 'hidden area' gets smaller. It is important to be mindful and give positive feedback when you are carrying this exercise out with colleagues, as through this process the 'blind area' gets smaller. The process of reflection can help in creating practitioners self-awareness and can help to increase the open area in the Johari Window.

The Johari Window provides a visual reference to enable you to explore aspects of yourself to increase your self-awareness.

Table 1

	Known to self	Not known to self
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Known to others	<p>Open area <i>Example:</i> This is what I know about myself, I am female and friendly</p>	<p>Blind area <i>Example:</i> my friends or colleagues might have a view of me, of which I am unaware. I can uncover their view and increase my 'open' area, if my friends or colleagues share with me what they know about me. For example they might think that I am very bossy and I might be completely unaware of this.</p>
Not known to others	<p>Hidden area <i>Example:</i> This is what I know about myself but hide from others. I may hide more or less from different people. My family and friend might know more of my hidden areas than my colleagues. The more I disclose from this area, the bigger the open area will become and the more I will learn about myself in the process. For example, I might cry at sad films and not want my work colleagues to know.</p>	<p>Unknown area <i>Example:</i> others or ourselves do not know the unknown area.</p> <p>As we receive feedback from others and tell others more about ourselves, we can develop into this unknown area and it will shrink in size.</p>
(Luft and Ingham1969)¹⁶		

Jack and Miller (2008) 7 suggest a reflective self-awareness model (**Table 2**). The model is split into three stages; the 'now' stage; the 'transitional' stage and finally 'the re-group' stage. The model suggests reflexive questions during each stage to encourage the nurse to become more self-aware.

The *now* stage

- Who am I now? (this includes thoughts , feelings and behaviours)
- What do I know about myself and what do I show to others? (this includes past experiences , experiences of others , cultural factors)
- What is it I would like to be more aware of? (this could include how others see you , they maybe able to offer you insight into behaviours you are not aware of)
- What has triggered this desire to change? (this could include what you are feeling uncomfortable about , this maybe a personal desire or motivation)

The *transition* stage

- What strengths/ limitations do I have already (this will require a certain amount of honesty)
- What do I need to develop? (you may choose to seek help from others to help you with this stage)
- What are the opportunities and threats to my development? (you may have to think about previous experiences that were helpful and not so helpful)

The *regroup* stage

- Where am I now? (what new knowledge have I gained about myself and the situation)
- What has changed about me and the way I am in the situation? (Do I do something differently now in these situations?)
- How do we grow? Where do we go from here? (How can we develop this new way learning and way of being?)

Jack and Miller (2008)⁷

Jack and Miller (2008) ⁷ propose a reflective style of self-awareness development and the use of reflection can be very helpful when considering ourselves and our thoughts and feelings. Reflective practice supports self-awareness development as it uses our experiences as learning for the future. Through examining our experiences we gain self-knowledge and being to understand our reactions to events and how we can deal with future similar situations in effective ways. There are multiple reflective models to support

this process such as those developed by Gibbs (1998) 17 and Johns (2000) 18. Use of models such as these can support nurses in structuring their thinking so that they can make more sense of situations.

Thinking creatively, arts based approaches can be effective when exploring and becoming more aware of our thoughts and feelings. Painting has been used as a way of developing emotional self-awareness when considering grief and loss (McAndrew & Warne 2010) 19. Collage development can be helpful as a way to explore feelings about situations and develop different insights; this can lead to self-learning and development (Jack 2012) 20. Mohammadian et al (2011) 21 suggest that reading and discussing poetry can support self-exploration which can lead to a reduction in anxiety and stress. You might want to consider writing a poem of your own as a way to explore how you feel about your practice, or about a situation that has occurred. Jack (2015) 22 suggests that poetry writing can help us to explore areas of our practice we might not normally consider, thereby reducing our 'blind' spot and furthering our self-knowledge.

Consider the following case study, which explores the importance of self-awareness when dealing with others

Case study.

Kelly has been working within the sexual health clinic for three months and is receiving support from a senior member of staff whilst she settles into the clinic. Kelly is working within a very busy urban hospital where a high percent of patients who attend the clinic are HIV positive.

During a one to one session with a senior nurse it is suggested that overall Kelly's interpersonal working skills with patients were of a high professional standard. However, she had noticed that there appeared to be one area, where Kelly could develop. The senior nurse had noticed that Kelly avoided engaging in conversations with HIV positive patients who were also being screened or treated for sexually transmitted infections.

Immediately, Kelly began to rationalize her behavior and what she was doing as being in terms of the public health aspect of her role and feeling uncomfortable in engaging in conversations about safer sex. The comment from the senior nurse encouraged Kelly think about her professional conduct and the impact this could be having on patient care.

Kelly's reflections

I found it really hard to hear that I was coming across as disinterested in providing care for certain patients. I had to question why this was and it made me feel uncomfortable that I might be viewed as judgmental. On further exploration, I came to realize that my behavior was more to do with my inexperience at dealing with sensitive issues and lacking confidence in knowing how to raise safer sex messages. So in order to manage my feelings of inadequacy, I detached myself from a certain group of patients as a self-protective coping mechanism.

Through feedback the open area of Kelly's Johari window increases and blind area decreases in size.

Thinking point

Thinking about your clinical practice, can you think of situations where having an understanding of your own values and beliefs will help you to understand the needs of your patient? How could your level of awareness impact on the care you provide?

When we know where our unique strengths and limitations lie, we are better equipped to face challenges, solve problems, make decisions and have a greater understanding of the outcomes of those decisions.

Concluding thoughts

The context of healthcare and support is changing. Most significantly, with people living longer, within HIV care settings we have an increasing number of patients to support, many with multiple and complex needs, and with higher expectations of what health care and support can and should deliver. These changes in healthcare delivery require nurses to work with patients in new partnerships, engaging with people in making choices about their health and healthcare. The more self aware that we become as nurses, the easier it becomes to be able to relate to others in order for them to provide the care that they require.

It is hoped that as a result of reading the article and exploring the thinking points within the article that you will consider how developing self awareness can help you both personally and professionally.

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